

Cat Licensing Another Perspective

By Ed Boks, Director
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When I returned to Animal Control Services in 1998, one of the first things I did was initiate a partnership with Public Health to conduct a scientific study to justify cat licensing. Having worked in all areas of animal control for nearly 15 years I was sure cat licensing made sense from a public health perspective, and to be candid, felt it would be a wonderful new source of revenue as well. I also knew that if I proposed a change in state law to require cat licensing there would be a lot of people upset with me. So I wanted all my ducks in a row. I wanted to demonstrate scientifically the value cat licensing would provide our citizens in protecting them from rabies.

The first step was to identify the problem. I found that in Arizona there have been no cases of cat rabies in the last seven years. In the states bordering Arizona the number of cat rabies cases reported since 1993 are as follows: Utah: 1, New Mexico: 1, Colorado: 0, Nevada: 0, California: 10, Mexico: 81.

Domestic animals accounted for 7.2% of all rabies cases reported in the United States in 1997, an increase of 6.3% from 1996. Reported cases of rabies in cats (300) were more than twice as numerous as those found in dogs (126). Since 1985, with the exception of 1987, there have always been more cases of cat rabies than dog rabies. And there has been a dramatic (50-75%) increase in the number of cat rabies cases since 1993 as a result of a raccoon epizootic in the eastern states.

Interestingly, eight of the 10 states with the highest incidence of cat rabies cases also have state mandated vaccination requirements. The remaining two, New Jersey has locally mandated cat vaccination ordinances and Iowa has no vaccination requirements for cats. It should be noted that the primary motivator for enacting mandatory cat vaccination laws in most of these states was a raccoon rabies epizootic. Pennsylvania has had a mandatory statewide cat vaccination law since 1980 (eight years prior to the raccoon epizootic) but it has the highest incidence of confirmed cat rabies cases.

From 1955 to 1992 the number of cat rabies cases has remained relatively constant at less than 200 per year with an increase from 1993 to the present, as noted above. The number of dog rabies cases has in that same time period (1955-1997) gone from approximately 2700 cases in 1955 to 565 in 1962. From 1970 to 1997 the number of reported dog rabies cases has remained relatively constant, below 200 cases. These statistics make for a convincing argument that mandatory dog vaccination/licensing programs were and are necessary and do protect people from rabies.

On the other hand, there is no evidence to support the hypothesis that requiring cat vaccination prevents human rabies exposure. Since 1980 there have been 32 confirmed cases of human rabies in the United States, and not one resulted from exposure to a rabid domestic cat.

Our aggressive and successful dog vaccination/licensing programs have, in effect, reduced the number of dog rabies cases to the levels that occur naturally in cats. This is true in communities where cat vaccinations are required and in communities where they are not

required. Let me be clear, although there is no empirical evidence that mandated state domestic cat vaccination laws prevent human rabies, it can be reasonably concluded from the numbers of cats testing positive each year that cats do serve as a host species for the rabies virus. This is especially true in eastern states experiencing the current raccoon rabies epizootic. However, there is no evidence that suggests cat rabies is problematic in the Southwest.

If a state law required a cat vaccination program it would be difficult to enforce and complicated by the fact that there are so many feral cats in our communities that would never be vaccinated. It seems to me that before such a program is mandated and implemented we should know if it would actually work. To date, no one has performed a controlled study or a time trend analysis to study whether cat vaccine requirements work. It may be that they do and it may be that they do not. We just don't know.

Do I favor rabies vaccination of cats? Absolutely. Every responsible cat owner should have their cat vaccinated. (And they should keep it indoors and have it neutered too.) However, (revenue generator that it may be), I am chagrined to admit I see no scientific reason at this time for an Arizona State mandate requiring rabies vaccination of cats, as I clearly do for dogs.